

Worms' eye view

OSS: THE SECRET HISTORY OF
AMERICA'S FIRST CENTRAL
INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

By R. Harris Smith.

University of California Press. 472
pages. £3.95.

It was presumably the publishers who called this book a secret history. The author, having made it clear in his preface that the CIA had refused to make the classified archives of the Office of Strategic Services available to him, claims more modestly, and more accurately, that it is a "political history" and a "very unofficial anatomy" of that organisation.

But Mr Harris Smith had plenty of published material to work with, as well as some that had not been published, gained from letters and interviews. The mixed bag of personalities recruited by General Donovan, himself a personality on a grand scale, when he was given the task of organising the first American secret service, were an intelligent and articulate lot. Nearly every operational group found its chronicler and Mr Harris Smith has read them all. There is, however, a shortage of stories from headquarters. The result is fascinating, but has had to be based on a collection of worm's eye views. Unfortunately, even 50 worms do not make a bird.

Mr Smith is an earnest, perhaps even a solemn, young man who has recently been working on Senator McGovern's campaign staff in California. It worries him when things and people do not turn out as his simple instincts tell him they should (when, for example, successful Republican lawyers are found to be imaginative and liberal in their ideas). So his last chapter, in which he tries to describe and explain how the CIA has developed from the ashes of the OSS, is the least satisfactory. He shows little comprehension of the forces which have driven the United States to its present policies but tries to find an explanation in personalities. Men, he complains plaintively, "who had been in the OSS during the second world war and had worked with the resistance . . . were responsible for planning the ill-fated invasion of Cuba." Mr Edmond Taylor, from whose "Awakening from History" Mr Smith quotes liberally, wrote in that book that it had not occurred to him at the time that the OSS wartime operations in Thailand:

were already starting to forge postwar sentimental, political and ultimately strategic links with south-east Asia that from the United States point of view would eventually turn into bonds of something strangely akin to imperial responsibilities.

Mr Smith does not quote this passage.

Most of the book is devoted to the operations of the OSS in the field. These provide some first-rate adventure stories. The most satisfactory chapters are those in which hindsight has proved his heroes, the "liberals" in OSS, right—or has at least proved the establishment policies wrong: those on the Darlan affair, on the stubborn official support for Chiang Kai-shek against those who wanted to gain the confidence of Mao Tse-tung

and, best of all, the account, so tragic in the light of all that has happened, of the spurning of Ho Chi Minh at a time when he seemed to be prepared to trust the United States.

Mr Smith seems to have little understanding of Europe, but he has an old-fashioned American liberal's distrust for Britain and its policies, which makes him dwell at length on the quarrels between OSS and SOE and use "anglophilia" as a term of reproach when applied to Americans. And his three references to the Minister Resident at the Allied headquarters in north-west Africa are to "wealthy publisher Harold Macmillan," "diplomat Harold Macmillan" and "Harold Macmillan of the Foreign Office." The winds of change seem to have passed him by.

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